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AUTHOR Matthews, Carleen
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ABSTRACT

This booklet describes some of the conflicts new programs are likely to face. It then presents techniques and processes that can help managers and staff resolve conflicts and build broad support for their project. As a special focus, the booklet describes five "principles of interdependence" that help the project managers and staff and their sponsor agencies mutually work toward project continuation. The five principles of interdependence are ownership, skill training, recognition of the uniqueness of each situation, representative participation, and neutrality. (Author/MLF)

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Keys to Community Involvement Series

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KEYS TO COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

INNOVATIVE PROJECTS: MAKING THEM STANDARD PRACTICE

Carleen Matthews

Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory
Portland, Oregon

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ABOUT THE SERIES

Keys to Community Involvement is a series of booklets developed for governing boards, community leaders, group members, administrators and citizens. The booklets are designed to help these audiences strengthen their skills in group processes, work cooperatively with others, and plan and carry out new projects. Topics include techniques to maintain enthusiasm in a group, ways that agencies can effectively use consultants, and factors that affect introducing and implementing new projects.

The booklets are written by members of the Rural Education Program of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. The Laboratory is a nonprofit, educational research and development corporation, headquartered in Portland, Oregon.

The booklets in the series are adapted from a much more comprehensive set of materials and training activities developed and field tested by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory over the past several years in dozens of locations throughout the western United States.

Information about other booklets in this series--titles and how to order--as well as information about related services--training, workshops and consultation--can be found on the inside and outside back covers of this booklet.

INTRODUCTION

An All-Too-Familiar Story

"Hey, Joe, remember that big staffing project we had here about three years ago? What ever happened to all that stuff?"

"I don't know. You know the 'regulars' around here never did get on too well with Pete, the project director and his staff of 'experts'."

"Yeah, I remember, but they really had some good stuff. As a matter of fact, I could use some of it right now on this new assignment I just got."

"Really? Well if you find it, don't tell anybody what it is or where it came from, or you'll be dead in the water."

"You know, Joe, it's really too bad that good ideas like that have to go down the tubes just because the people who thought them up were resented by others."

As any new project gets underway, the coordinator and project staff may find themselves facing conflict between the excitement of a "new" approach, and the resentment their colleagues feel toward "shake-ups" and changes. Conflicts

must be acknowledged when they occur between the needs of the project and the needs of the larger agency. If appropriate steps are taken to resolve the conflicts, then long-term continuation of a new project and its eventual incorporation as standard agency practice become more likely.

This booklet describes some of the conflicts new programs are likely to face. It then presents techniques and processes which can help managers and staff resolve conflicts and build broad support for their project. As a special focus, this booklet will describe five "principles of interdependence" which help the project managers and staff and their sponsor agencies mutually work toward project continuation.

A NEW LOOK AT CONTINUATION

It takes hard work and much time to create an innovative project. Most people who make such an investment are keenly interested in seeing that the goals and practices of the project are continued beyond the initial try-out or pilot period. It is, therefore, common for project participants to seek a formal decision from their sponsor agency for project "continuation." However, project continuation is not always such a straightforward matter, nor does it always result from formal agency decisions. Field experience of our Rural Education Program and findings of educational research[1] show that project continuation occurs when project activities become used as standard practice in the sponsoring agency. For example, the project may lose its formal status, with its activities ceasing to belong to a small, discrete work group. The project then "continues" to the extent that its practices become part of the ongoing activities of the entire agency.

Our Rural Education Program looked at various project successes and failures in the field, and found that some factors kept recurring and were noticeably present in projects that continued. In projects where these factors were weak or lacking, there was difficulty in achieving the incorporation of project activities into agency practices. We call these factors "principles of interdependence" because they describe ways the new project and its sponsor agency mutually influence each other to support project continuation. The five principles of interdependence which seem especially important are ownership, skill training, recognition of the uniqueness of each situation, representative participation and neutrality.[2] Managers and staff members of innovative projects will find that these principles can guide them toward more certain continuation.

OWNERSHIP

The principle of ownership seems to be most vital for project acceptance and continuation. Ownership occurs as people in the project and throughout the agency come to understand that the project belongs to all of them. People want to "own" the project when they see that its practices address their specific work concerns. When ownership is felt, people begin to invest energy and commitment toward the continuation of project practices. It's difficult--but possible--to get this sense of ownership started; and it is essential that it be maintained.

To build ownership in your new project:

- Link to people's needs and interests. From the beginning, create opportunities for people not directly involved in the project to describe some of their work needs and problems which might be alleviated if the new project is successful. Then continuously inform them of ways

that project staff considers their concerns when designing new materials and practices. Seeing that project solutions directly link to their felt needs helps people become interested in having the project succeed.

- Involve people in your plans and problem solving. Most organizations contain people with talents and expertise that are often equal to that of outside consultants. If you utilize these people when feasible as "inside consultants," their involvement and understanding are likely to be communicated to other people close to them. This widens your project's sphere of influence within the agency.

- Keep the large picture in view. Change in one aspect of the organization affects other aspects as well. Most agencies have their pet horror stories of new projects which failed to consider significant people while plans and decisions were being made. *A person is significant to a decision, if the outcome of that decision affects, or is affected by, that person.* To plan for "cross-unit staffing" or "open classrooms" without consulting operations staff and custodial personnel at the beginning, or to institute an affirmative action plan without preparing the managers and staff who receive and work with the new role-occupants are examples of ways a new project can commit organizational suicide. People depend upon established roles and work routines to feel competent and coordinate their tasks to timelines. If your project upsets these routines, resentment will occur--unless people have a prior opportunity to understand and influence how, when and where their work routines and roles will be affected.

- Let those who will use your new materials have a part in developing them. A strange form that must be filled out, or a revised manual which contains interesting pictures but none of the familiar words (or self-written notes in the margins) are the kind of symbols that trigger people's resentment of upsetting changes. The transition from familiarity to change is easier if people have taken part in the creation of the materials which they must ultimately use. A bonus benefit of this approach is the ownership that results when people grapple with the task of putting project ideas into words and illustrations. As they share ideas with project staff, their understanding of the project will be far greater than any you could generate with "P.R." rhetoric.

- Give quick and continuous information about the results of people's suggestions. In modern organizations it is difficult to feel significant and see the results of time spent in meetings. If people have spent energy to describe their ideas and contribute their suggestions, enable them to see a result for their effort. For example, try sending a copy of the new manual with a note of thanks pencilled beside the "three new steps" which an employee suggested. It doesn't take much time or money, but it certainly does demonstrate that you valued that person's contribution. Feeling influential is a part of feeling ownership.

One element of ownership, however, has not yet been mentioned. Without sincerity and a genuine regard for the opinions and feelings of others, the communications of project staff to the rest of the agency will not likely build support. It is possible to implement the previously described steps in a purely manipulative manner. But such efforts

proceed under a thin disguise. Most people enjoy being useful and usually respond to requests for assistance with sincere support and interest. If they suspect that the bids for help are not genuine but merely tactics to gain their attention, then their resultant distrust and resentment can sour the project's prospects.

SKILL TRAINING

The second principle is closely related to the first. It holds that members of the participating organizations need orientation, sometimes even training, to understand and participate in project practices. Orientation and training are most successful when they show how new practices relate to their ongoing work. The consultant or project member who provides the orientation and training needs several skills, including the following:

- Ability to focus on the practical day-to-day details of project practices and people's needs. Most people strongly prefer very concrete "how-to-do-it" workshops given by familiar personnel, rather than a more general, inspirational format given by outsiders. If you feel that outside consultants have valuable service to offer, then it can be very effective to team an inside leader with the external consultant during training sessions. Another effective option is to hire consultants to train inside trainers who then can give on-going specific assistance to the participants. Both of these options have the advantages of passing the consultant's skills on to familiar insiders who remain on the scene after the consultant leaves.

- Ability to model and teach problem-solving processes which help people create goals that come from their genuine needs. Trainers must also help participants identify obstacles that stand in the way of success, locate alternative solutions that resolve the obstacles, choose and implement a preferred solution and assess the effect of the solution. People enjoy a sense of mastery--and feel anxious without it. If they feel competent to solve the myriad problems that surface during organizational changes, they are more likely to anticipate and accept the changes.

- Ability to use and demonstrate communication skills which help people identify interpersonal and political issues and then effectively resolve them. Clear and open communication strengthens people's sense of reality and supports their group morale. Genuine communication supports people's self-esteem and consideration of others. Many communication processes, which may seem like games and child-play at first, are designed to tackle the complex tangles of mistrust, abusive power and unclear direction that often beset new (as well as established) projects.

- Ability to provide responsive leadership which adjusts to changing needs and attitudes of people. As the external work setting changes people respond with internal changes in their felt needs and attitudes. At first people experience change with feelings of confusion and loss of familiar guides. They become dependent, for a short time, upon the guidance of those who know the new way. This vulnerability requires that leaders inspire self-reliance, learning and the development of new skills among the participants. Otherwise, participants in a change effort may respond with balkiness or anxiety which disrupts their ability to perform new tasks.

The Rural Education Program has given assistance to new projects with a model of leadership we call "Initiate then Support then Withdraw." When leaders "initiate" change they must be willing to contribute a majority of the guidance and planning for new activities. As participants gain some new skills, the leader gives "support" by sharing the guidance and planning tasks 50-50 with the participants. As further skills are mastered, the leader begins to "withdraw" to a consultant role and leave a majority of the guidance and planning tasks to the participants.

UNIQUENESS OF EACH SITUATION

The third principle which seems to support project incorporation is that the uniqueness of each situation must be acknowledged. This point may seem self-evident, but its ramifications are not. Each agency, project and person is a unique combination of resources, needs, awarenesses and limitations, and only the people in the situation itself know what that combination is. When agency people first hear about a new project, they often express something like: "That sounds like a good idea, but I don't think it will work here unless we change it around some." Such a statement doesn't provide a terribly clear plan, but the wise project staff will recognize the clue and pursue the point, hunting for validation and details from others. Often it turns out that some decision-making norm or organizational policy of which people are only partially aware underlies the uneasiness. To ignore or violate the circumstances of the agency is to ensure that the project will not succeed.

> *One large agency discovered that a cross-unit work group which had been assigned to a school-community project had difficulty focusing on the needs of the local site amidst all its other responsibilities and*

interests. After this experience, members of the group advocated that in the future, similar projects might fare better if there were clear accountability on the part of one agency unit to support the project.

In another smaller agency, however, the organization noted that keeping a new project in the domain of just one unit prevented other interested staff members from actively participating. Ultimately, those left out became critical of the project.

It is the uniqueness of each situation which determines the best course of action.

REPRESENTATIVE PARTICIPATION

A fourth principle associated with project continuation and incorporation is that of representative participation. When people from all participating organizational units are aware and involved, project continuation is more likely. One vital reason for this is that wide representation enhances communications more than any planned "awareness" program. Each person affected has contributions to make to the program which can greatly enhance its success and its continuing relevance. If a project is perceived as one which is widely accepted and is congruent with other organizational priorities, it has high probability of being continued.

In one project, a community council was keenly aware of division in their community between Indian and Anglo members. Many group members were fearful of bringing representatives of different community subgroups together. As the project unfolded, however, a wide representation of viewpoints was found in the subgroups. Conflict resolution processes were introduced when needed and the pilot school-community project was completed, with the following outcomes:

- *A lawsuit initiated by the Indian community against the local school district before the project was begun was dropped within a few months after the project began to function.*

- *A needs assessment revealed that Anglos and Indians shared the view that education would be improved in this district by building two new schools in areas which were remote, but had sufficient Indian student population.*

- *The communities where community councils were active passed bond elections that areas without community councils rejected.*

- *After a tryout of the new project, three more communities wanted community councils and initiated them by paying for process facilitators out of their own budgets.*

NEUTRALITY

The fifth and final principle is one which makes the others operational. Processes which build ownership and local participation in a project succeed when they are facilitated by a neutral party, a party that is willing to have the outcomes of a project decided by the people who participate in it. Neutral facilitation lacks investment in any one particular outcome. It values equally people who are affiliated and not affiliated with the project and promotes fair evaluation of all activities, ideas, plans, decisions and programs. If the project staff has definite ends in mind and will consider no effort acceptable which does not lead to these ends, ownership may quickly fade, if it ever gets started.

When facing tight deadlines, audits by the funders and managerial scrutiny, it is difficult for the project coordinator and staff to maintain a spirit of neutrality. The delicate balance between direction-setting and flexibility can be easily tipped into damaging fights for control and organizational conflicts. It requires careful planning from the start to maintain neutrality.

- Recruitment of project leaders and staff must involve not merely a search for "content expertise" but also a search for demonstrated abilities to foster neutrality.

- When community conflicts or intra-agency power struggles surface, the project needs to align, not with specific groups but with goals that are commonly shared among conflicting groups. This gives the project both a wide survival base, and an opportunity to promote conflict resolving leadership.

- The neutral party is wise enough to know that new practices, no matter how innovative, have their roots in established traditions of the organization. When established procedures are strongly maligned, the transition process is disrupted, and the new practices are either overwhelmed by opposition or they slowly wither, cut off from the roots of organizational tradition and support.

A WORD ABOUT YOUR MANAGEMENT

If the organizational climate of your agency supports project participants, the prospects for effective incorporation of the new approach into standard practices are significantly increased. In particular, project success is keyed to the active support of those administrators and managers who appear to be "gatekeepers" of change. The

attitude of these leaders directly influences the project staff's willingness to expend extra effort on their project and, thereby, directly increases the chances of project success and incorporation. The attitudes of agency leaders, in effect, tell the staff how seriously they should take the project goals. Unless the project seems to have organizational importance, staff members may not put in the effort and emotional investment necessary for success and ultimate acceptance.

Four general questions are likely to determine the degree of administrative support for the continuation of the project:

- What "success" during implementation activities can the project display?
- How "central" or important are the needs that the project serves?
- What human and material resources are required by the project?
- Does the organizational and political climate inhibit or promote the project?

Generally, if administrators perceive the project as being important and successful, having the support of the staff and not too expensive, their support can be expected.

SUMMING IT UP

The previous points foreshadow a major premise of this paper: the agency setting of a new project has a major influence on its prospects for survival and acceptance. It is exciting to focus on the new ideas created by your project, and it is satisfying to work closely with others as a project team. But unless considerable energy is used to link

to organizational traditions and reach out for agency-wide support, the excitement and satisfaction will be short-lived. Your new project, no matter how powerful its concepts, is a portion of the bigger organization. Keeping the needs of the whole agency linked to the interests of your smaller group, according to research and our field experience, is the most likely way for your project activities to become established practices in your organization.

FOOTNOTES

1. Three studies that are particularly comprehensive and support the contents of this paper include:

Julia Cheever, S. B. Neill, and J. Quinn, Transferring Success. Prepared for the U.S. Office of of Education, HEW. 300-75-0402. (San Francisco: Far West Laboratory for Education, Research and Development, 1976)

Michael Fullan and Alan Pomfret, Review of Research on Curriculum Implementation. Prepared for the National Institute of Education, NIE-P-74-0122. (Ontario: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1975)

P. Berman and M. W. McLaughlin, Federal Programs Supporting Educational Change, Volume IV: The Findings in Review. Prepared for the U.S. Office of Education, HEW. R-1589/4-HEW. 300-75-0402. (Santa Monica, California: Rand Corporation, 1975)

2. Lee Green, "Process Before Program: A Recipe for Community Involvement," Community Education Journal (May/June 1975), pp. 45-46.

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